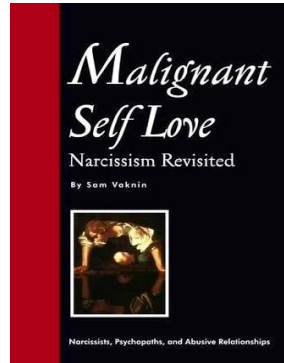


Cannibalism and Human Sacrifice

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"I believe that when man evolves a civilization higher than the mechanized but still primitive one he has now, the eating of human flesh will be sanctioned. For then man will have thrown off all of his superstitions and irrational taboos."

(Diego Rivera)

"One calls 'barbarism' whatever he is not accustomed to."

(Montaigne, On Cannibalism)

"Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed."

(New Testament, John 6:53-55)

Cannibalism (more precisely, anthropophagy) is an age-old tradition that, judging by a constant stream of flabbergasted news reports, is far from extinct. Much-debated indications exist that our Neanderthal, Proto-Neolithic, and Neolithic (Stone Age) predecessors were cannibals. Similarly contested claims were made with regards to the 12th century advanced Anasazi culture in the southwestern United States and the Minoans in Crete (today's Greece).

The Britannica Encyclopedia (2005 edition) recounts how the "*Binderwurs of central India ate their sick and aged in the belief that the act was pleasing to their goddess, Kali.*" Cannibalism may also have been common among followers of the Shaktism cults in India.

Other sources attribute cannibalism to the 16th century Imbangala in today's Angola and Congo, the Fang in Cameroon, the Mangbetu in Central Africa, the Ache in Paraguay, the Tonkawa in today's Texas, the Calusa in current day Florida, the Caddo and Iroquois confederacies of Indians in North America, the Cree in Canada, the Witoto, natives of Colombia and Peru, the Carib in the Lesser Antilles (whose distorted name - Canib - gave rise to the word "cannibalism"), to Maori tribes in today's New Zealand, and to various peoples in Sumatra (like the Batak).

The Wikipedia numbers among the practitioners of cannibalism the ancient Chinese, the Korowai tribe of southeastern Papua, the Fore tribe in New Guinea (and many other tribes in Melanesia), the Aztecs, the people of Yucatan, the Purchas from Popayan, Colombia, the denizens of the Marquesas Islands of Polynesia, and the natives of the captaincy of Sergipe in Brazil.

From Congo and Central Africa to Germany and from Mexico to New Zealand, cannibalism is enjoying a morbid revival of interest, if not of practice. A veritable torrent of sensational tomes and movies adds to our ambivalent fascination with man-eaters.

Cannibalism is not a monolithic affair. It can be divided thus:

I. Non-consensual consumption of human flesh post-mortem

For example, when the corpses of prisoners of war are devoured by their captors. This used to be a common exercise among island tribes (e.g., in Fiji, the Andaman and Cook islands) and is still the case in godforsaken battle zones such as Congo (formerly Zaire), or among the defeated Japanese soldiers in World War II.

Similarly, human organs and fetuses as well as mummies are still being gobbled up - mainly in Africa and Asia - for remedial and medicinal purposes and in order to enhance one's libido and vigor.

On numerous occasions the organs of dead companions, colleagues, family, or neighbors were reluctantly ingested by isolated survivors of horrid accidents (the Uruguay rugby team whose plane crashed in the Andes, the boat people fleeing Asia), denizens of besieged cities (e.g., during the siege of Leningrad), members of exploratory expeditions gone astray (the Donner Party in Sierra Nevada, California and John Franklin's Polar expedition), famine-stricken populations (Ukraine in the 1930s, China in the 1960s), and the like.

Finally, in various pre-nation-state and tribal societies, members of the family were encouraged to eat specific parts of their dead relatives as a sign of respect or in order to partake of the deceased's wisdom, courage, or other positive traits (endocannibalism).

II. Non-consensual consumption of human flesh from a live source

For example, when prisoners of war are butchered for the express purpose of being eaten by their victorious enemies.

A notorious and rare representative of this category of cannibalism is the punitive ritual of being eaten alive. The kings of the tribes of the Cook Islands were thought to embody the gods. They punished dissent by dissecting their screaming and conscious adversaries and consuming their flesh piecemeal, eyeballs first.

The Sawney Bean family in Scotland, during the reign of King James I, survived for decades on the remains (and personal belongings) of victims of their murderous sprees.

Real-life [serial killers](#), like Jeffrey Dahmer, Albert Fish, Sascha Speiswieser, Fritz Haarmann, Issei Sagawa, and [Ed Gein](#), lured, abducted, and massacred countless people and then consumed their flesh and preserved the inedible parts as trophies. These lurid deeds inspired a slew of books and films, most notably *The Silence of the Lambs* with Hannibal (Lecter) the Cannibal as its protagonist.

III. Consensual consumption of human flesh from live and dead human bodies

Armin Meiwes, the "Master Butcher (Der Metzgermeister)", arranged over the Internet to meet Bernd Jürgen Brandes on March 2001. Meiwes amputated the penis of his guest and they both ate it. He then proceeded to kill Brandes (with the latter's consent recorded on video), and snack on what remained of him. Sexual cannibalism is a paraphilia and an extreme - and thankfully, rare - form of fetishism.

The Aztecs willingly volunteered to serve as human sacrifices (and to be tucked into afterwards). They firmly believed that they were offerings, chosen by the gods themselves, thus being rendered immortal.

Dutiful sons and daughters in China made their amputated organs and sliced tissues (mainly the liver) available to their sick parents (practices known as Ko Ku and Ko Kan). Such donation were considered remedial. Princess Miao Chuang who surrendered her severed hands to her ailing father was henceforth deified.

Non-consensual cannibalism is murder, pure and simple. The attendant act of cannibalism, though aesthetically and ethically reprehensible, cannot aggravate this supreme assault on all that we hold sacred.

But consensual cannibalism is a lot trickier. Modern medicine, for instance, has blurred the already thin line between right and wrong.

What is the ethical difference between consensual, post-mortem, organ harvesting and consensual, post-mortem cannibalism?

Why is stem cell harvesting (from aborted fetuses) morally superior to consensual post-mortem cannibalism?

When members of a plane-wrecked rugby team, stranded on an inaccessible, snow-piled, mountain range resort to eating each other in order to survive, we turn a blind eye to their repeated acts of cannibalism - but we condemn the very same deed in the harshest terms if it takes place between two consenting, and even eager adults in Germany. Surely, we don't treat murder, pedophilia, and incest the same way!

As the Auxiliary Bishop of Montevideo said after the crash:

"... Eating someone who has died in order to survive is incorporating their substance, and it is quite possible to compare this with a graft. Flesh survives when assimilated by someone in extreme need, just as it does when an eye or heart of a dead man is grafted onto a living man..."

(Read, P.P. 1974. Alive. Avon, New York)

Complex ethical issues are involved in the apparently straightforward practice of consensual cannibalism.

Consensual, in vivo, cannibalism (a-la Messrs. Meiwes and Brandes) resembles suicide. The cannibal is merely the instrument of voluntary self-destruction. Why would we treat it different to the way we treat any other form of suicide pact?

Consensual cannibalism is not the equivalent of drug abuse because it has no social costs. Unlike junkies, the cannibal and his meal are unlikely to harm others. What gives society the right to intervene, therefore?

If we own our bodies and, thus, have the right to smoke, drink, have an abortion, commit suicide, and will our organs to science after we die - why don't we possess the inalienable right to will our delectable tissues to a discerning cannibal post-mortem (or to victims of famine in Africa)?

When does our right to dispose of our organs in any way we see fit crystallize? Is it when we die? Or after we are [dead](#)? If so, what is the meaning and legal validity of a living will? And why can't we make a living will and bequeath our cadaverous selves to the nearest cannibal?

Do dead people have rights and can they claim and invoke them while they are still alive? Is the live person the same as his dead body, does he "own" it, does the state have any rights in it? Does the corpse still retain its previous occupant's "personhood"? Are cadavers still [human](#), in any sense of the word?

We find all three culinary variants abhorrent. Yet, this instinctive repulsion is a curious matter. The onerous demands of survival should have encouraged cannibalism rather than make it a taboo. Human flesh is protein-rich. Most societies, past and present (with the exception of the industrialized West), need to make efficient use of rare protein-intensive resources.

If cannibalism enhances the chances of survival - why is it universally prohibited? For many a reason.

I. The Sanctity of Life

Historically, cannibalism preceded, followed, or precipitated an act of murder or extreme deprivation (such as [torture](#)). It habitually clashed with the principle of the [sanctity of life](#). Once allowed, even under the strictest guidelines, cannibalism tended to debase and devalue human life and foster homicide, propelling its practitioners down a slippery ethical slope towards bloodlust and orgiastic massacres.

II. The Afterlife

Moreover, in life, the human body and form are considered by most religions (and philosophers) to be the abode of the soul, the divine spark that animates us all. The post-mortem integrity of this shrine is widely thought to guarantee a faster, unhindered access to the afterlife, to immortality, and eventual reincarnation (or karmic cycle in eastern religions).

For this reason, to this very day, orthodox Jews refuse to subject their relatives to a post-mortem autopsy and organ harvesting. Fijians and Cook Islanders used to consume their enemies' carcasses in order to prevent their souls from joining hostile ancestors in heaven.

III. Chastening Reminders

Cannibalism is a chilling reminder of our humble origins in the [animal kingdom](#). To the cannibal, we are no better and no more than cattle or sheep. Cannibalism confronts us with the irreversibility of our death and its finality. Surely, we cannot survive our demise with our cadaver mutilated and gutted and our skeletal bones scattered, gnawed, and chewed on?

IV. Medical Reasons

Infrequently, cannibalism results in [prion diseases](#) of the nervous system, such as kuru. The same paternalism that gave rise to the banning of drug abuse, the outlawing of [suicide](#), and the [Prohibition](#) of alcoholic drinks in the 1920s - seeks to shelter us from the pernicious medical outcomes of cannibalism and to protect others who might become our victims.

V. The Fear of Being Objectified

Being treated as an object (being objectified) is the most torturous form of [abuse](#). People go to great lengths to seek [empathy](#) and to be perceived by others as three dimensional entities with emotions, needs, priorities, wishes, and preferences.

The cannibal reduces others by treating them as so much meat. Many cannibal [serial killers](#) transformed the organs of their victims into trophies. The Cook Islanders sought to humiliate their enemies by eating, digesting, and then defecating them - having absorbed their mana (prowess, life force) in the process.

VI. The Argument from Nature

Cannibalism is often castigated as "unnatural". Animals, goes the myth, don't prey on their own kind.

Alas, like so many other romantic lores, this is untrue. Most species - including our closest relatives, the chimpanzees - do cannibalize. Cannibalism in nature is widespread and serves diverse purposes such as population control (chickens, salamanders, toads), food and protein security in conditions of scarcity (hippopotamuses, scorpions, certain types of dinosaurs), threat avoidance (rabbits, mice, rats, and hamsters), and the propagation of genetic material through exclusive mating (Red-back spider and many mantids).

Moreover, humans are a part of nature. Our deeds and misdeeds are natural by definition. Seeking to tame nature is a natural act. Seeking to establish hierarchies and subdue or relinquish our enemies are natural propensities. By avoiding cannibalism we seek to transcend nature. Refraining from cannibalism is the unnatural act.

VIII. The Argument from Progress

It is a circular syllogism involving a tautology and goes like this:

Cannibalism is barbaric. Cannibals are, therefore, barbarians. Progress entails the abolition of this practice.

The premises - both explicit and implicit - are axiomatic and, therefore, shaky. What makes cannibalism barbarian? And why is progress a desirable outcome? There is a prescriptive fallacy involved, as well:

Because we do not eat the bodies of dead people - we ought not to eat them.

VIII. Arguments from Religious Ethics

The major monotheistic religions are curiously mute when it comes to cannibalism. Human sacrifice is denounced numerous times in the Old Testament - but man-eating goes virtually unmentioned. The Eucharist in Christianity - when the believers consume the actual body and blood of Jesus - is an act of undisguised cannibalism:

"That the consequence of Transubstantiation, as a conversion of the total substance, is the transition of the entire substance of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, is the express doctrine of the Church"

(Catholic Encyclopedia)

"CANON II.-If any one saith, that, in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the substance of the bread and wine remains conjointly with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denieth that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood-the species Only of the bread and wine remaining-which conversion indeed the Catholic Church most aptly calls Transubstantiation; let him be anathema.

CANON VIII.-If any one saith, that Christ, given in the Eucharist, is eaten spiritually only, and not also sacramentally and really; let him be anathema."

(The Council of Trent, The Thirteenth Session - The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent, Ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 75-91.)

Still, most systems of morality and ethics impute to Man a privileged position in the scheme of things (having been created in the "image of God"). Men and women are supposed to transcend their animal roots and inhibit their baser instincts (an idea incorporated into [Freud's tripartite model](#) of the human psyche). The anthropocentric chauvinistic view is that it is permissible to kill all other animals in order to consume their flesh. Man, in this respect, is sui generis.

Yet, it is impossible to rigorously derive a prohibition to eat human flesh from any known moral system. As Richard Routley-Silvan observes in his essay "In Defence of Cannibalism", that something is innately repugnant does not make it morally prohibited. Moreover, that we find cannibalism nauseating is probably the outcome of upbringing and conditioning rather than anything innate.

According to Greek mythology, Man was created from the ashes of the Titans, the children of Uranus and Gaea, whom Zeus struck with thunderbolts for murdering his son, Zagreus, and then devouring his body. Mankind, therefore, is directly descendant from the Titans, who may well have been the first cannibals.

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